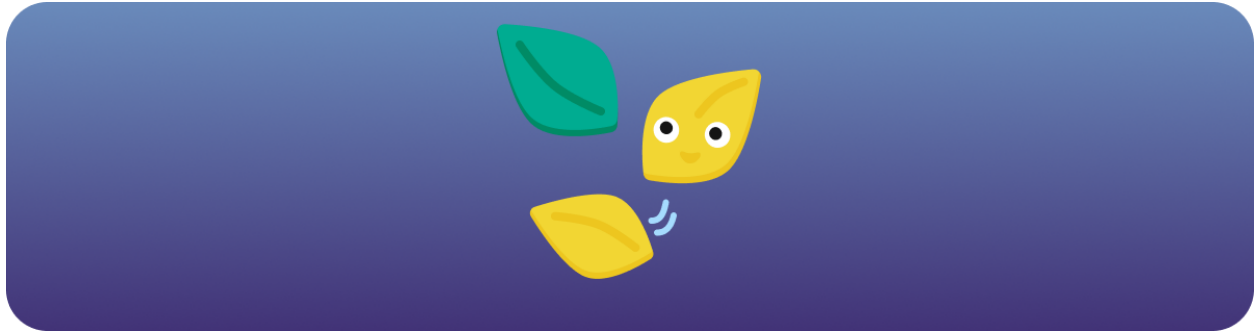




The Back-to-School Anxiety Guide

Practical parenting support, scripts, and activities for kids ages 5 to 12



A free guide for parents and caregivers

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WHY THIS HAPPENS

When back-to-school feels BIG

If your kid is dreading the first day, or you're already bracing for the tears at drop-off, take a breath. This is one of the most normal things a family goes through. The transition into a new school year can be a big one. So of course it stirs something up, for them and honestly for you too.

Most kids settle in within a couple of weeks, once the new routine starts to feel familiar. And if it doesn't ease up right away, that's not a sign you're missing something or doing something wrong. Anxiety is actually the most common thing kids deal with emotionally, and it tends to show up for the first time before middle school, which is a big part of why this transition can be challenging¹.

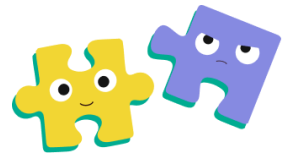
Here's one thing that might take some pressure off: kids who cope best aren't the ones who never feel scared². They're the ones who learn to look back and say, *"That was hard, and I got through it."*

Researchers call this stress-related growth, and you can help build it with something as simple as a warm conversation after school. We'll show you how.

¹ Source: PMC, "Identifying Child Anxiety Through Schools" (2022), ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9363860

² Source: PrairieCare, "What to Do When Kids Are Scared to Go Back to School", prairie-care.com

Signs to watch for



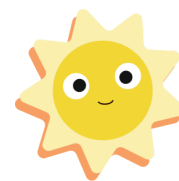
AGES 5-8

- Stomachaches or headaches with no medical cause, especially on Sunday nights or school mornings
- Clinginess, tears, or tantrums at drop-off that don't ease after the first couple of weeks
- Trouble sleeping or asking the same worried question over and over (*"What if you forget to pick me up?"*)
- Regression, like thumb-sucking, accidents, or baby talk in a kid who'd outgrown it

AGES 9-12

- Avoidance: dragging out the morning, "forgetting" things, asking to stay home
- Irritability or meltdowns that seem out of proportion to the trigger
- A new focus on being liked, fitting in, or what other kids think
- Perfectionism or a sudden drop in confidence about schoolwork

A little of this in the first two weeks is just ordinary adjustment. If it's still intense a month in, or it's keeping your child from going to school, it's worth a conversation with their pediatrician or school counselor. More on that at the end of this guide.



Try these practical tips

In the weeks before

- Ease back into the school-year sleep schedule about a week early, in small daily shifts, so the first day isn't also the first early morning
- Try a preview together: drive by the school, look at class photos or walk through what the morning will look like
- Bring up the worry before your child has to: *"A lot of kids feel a little nervous about the first day. What's on your mind about it?"*

The morning of

- Build in a little extra time so the morning doesn't feel like a countdown. Rushing tends to turn up the anxiety
- Keep goodbyes short, warm, and consistent. A long, drawn-out goodbye often makes it harder to leave, not easier
- Give your child one small, actionable thing to focus on, such as: finding their cubby or saying hi to one person

After school

- Offer a snack and some quiet time before asking questions. School takes more out of kids than it looks like from the outside
- Ask small, specific questions instead of *"How was your day?"* Try *"What made you laugh today?"* or *"Who did you sit with at lunch?"*
- Notice and name what went right, even something tiny. This is where that stress-related growth reframe really lives

Scripts you can use



Validating the feeling (any age)

"It makes sense that you feel nervous. New things are hard, even good new things."

"Your body is trying to protect you. It's just a little too worried right now."

"I'm not going to tell you there's nothing to worry about. I'm going to help you handle it."

At drop-off (ages 5 to 8)

"I'll be thinking about you at snack time. I'll see you right here at pickup."

"You can feel scared and still be brave. Those two things go together."

"Let's do our goodbye. Hug, high five, and go." (pick one small ritual and repeat it every day, since predictability really helps here)

Talking through a worry (ages 9 to 12)

"What's the worry, exactly? Let's say it out loud."

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely is that to actually happen?"

"What did you do the last time something felt this hard? You got through that one too."

"What's one small step you could take tomorrow, even if the worry's still there?"

When they ask to stay home

"I hear that you don't want to go. I'm still going to help you get there, because avoiding it usually makes it feel bigger, not smaller."

"Let's just figure out the smallest first step. Get dressed, and we'll figure out the rest from there."



Activities to help with anxiety

Social Story (all ages)

Write a short, first-person story about the school routine. *"I walk into my classroom. I put my bag in my cubby. Sometimes I feel nervous, and that's okay. My teacher is there to help."*

Reading it together a few times before school starts helps the day feel familiar before it even happens.

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding (all ages)

Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can hear, 3 you can touch, 2 you can smell, and 1 you can taste. It's a gentle way to pull attention out of the "what if" loop and back into the here and now. Great for the car ride to school.

Worry Jar (ages 5 to 8)

Write or draw the worry on a slip of paper and feed it to a jar. Holding something in their hands gives big feelings somewhere to go. For young children, a simple, tangible action can help them process it.

Balloon Breathing (ages 5 to 9)

Place hands on the belly, breathe in slowly like filling a balloon for a count of 4, hold for 2, then breathe out slowly for a count of 6. The slow exhale is what really calms the body down.

Confidence Countdown (ages 9 to 12)

Before a hard day, list 3 things that went okay the last time something felt this way. Looking at the real evidence next to the worry is exactly the kind of reframing that helps, not "don't worry," but "here's what actually happened last time."

Readiness checklist



A simple run-through for the week before school starts. You don't need to check every box, just use whatever helps your kid feel a little more ready.

- ☐ Practiced the morning routine at least once, start to finish
- ☐ Adjusted bedtime and wake-up time to match the school schedule
- ☐ Visited or driven by the school, or looked at photos of the classroom together
- ☐ Talked openly about what feels exciting and what feels nervous
- ☐ Picked a simple, consistent goodbye ritual for drop-off
- ☐ Packed a comfort item or note in their bag (if that fits your kid)
- ☐ Reviewed who's picking them up and what happens after school
- ☐ Labeled supplies, lunch gear, and anything easy to lose
- ☐ Introduced or reintroduced one calming tool, like balloon breathing or a worry jar
- ☐ Given yourself permission to expect an adjustment period, not instant ease



When to get more support

It's always okay to reach out to your child's pediatrician, a school counselor, or a child therapist, especially if:

- The anxiety hasn't eased after 3 to 4 weeks of the new routine
- Your child is refusing to go to school, or mornings involve regular meltdowns
- Physical symptoms like stomachaches, headaches, or trouble sleeping are frequent
- The worry seems to be spreading beyond school into other parts of daily life

You're not overreacting by asking. Asking is never the wrong call.



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